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Cold war tactics: lies and fear

PARIS—A recent Warsaw "disinformation" story holds that Zbigniew Brzezinski, former U.S. national security adviser, was responsible for the election of Pope John Paul II. But what seems to lie behind this propaganda exercise is a great deal more interesting and more troubling.

The Warsaw story claims to quote a memorandum from Brzezinski to President Jimmy Carter in March, 1978, outlining a plan to create unrest in Poland and pull the country out of the Soviet orbit. Karol Cardinal Wojtyla's installation as pope was, by implication, a part of this plan.

But there is more to this. According to a Washington report being circulated, by the United States Information Agency [USIA], an internal Soviet intelligence service document exists that draws exactly this same conclusion—not for propaganda ends but for the guidance of the Soviet government itself. This analysis, which U.S. officials describe as an "undoubtedly authentic" KGB appraisal of the Pope's election, claims that Brzezinski, who is of Polish origin, together with John Cardinal Kral of Philadelphia, also of Polish descent, organized the other American cardinals and influenced the West Germans to vote as a bloc for Cardinal Wojtyla at the October, 1978, papal consistory.

An anti-communist Pole in the White House, a Polish cardinal in Philadelphia, a Pole unprecedentedly named Pope—this plus the emergence of Solidarity in Poland, influenced by the Polish Catholic intellectuals and enjoying the church's support: It all seems to fit together. All too plausible is that a Soviet intelligence analyst would put all of it together and add it up make five.

The story fits Soviet mirror thinking. If the KGB could rig the election of the Pope, it would surely do so. The notion that American cardinals might resist manipulation by Brzezinski and the CIA would seem unlikely to a Soviet analyst. Cardinals by definition are reactionaries, serving a reactionary interest.

From such a Soviet analysis, the conclusion equally would follow that this Pope must be stopped. The attempted assassination of John Paul II and the alleged plan to kill Lech Walesa while on a visit to Rome both make sense if the Soviet government believed itself being attacked by the U.S. at the most vulnerable point in East European security system in Poland.

The USIA would seem to be circulating this report because it reinforces the evidence Italian services already have revealed of Bulgarian, and implicitly Soviet, involvement in the papal attack and the Walesa plot. But it shows something else. It suggests

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an astonishing Soviet fear of American power, of the effectiveness of CIA conspiracies—able to reach into the Vatican itself at the moment of a pope's election.

The picture of the Soviet Union that this story suggests is far from that ordinarily offered by Washington. This is not a USSR which is sure of itself, aggressive and expansionist, confident of military superiority over the West and ready for a nuclear war that it expects to win. This does not sound like Moscow confidently driving for the warm waters of the Arabian Sea, master of the Horn of Africa, deploying its subordinates toward the Panama Canal, Mexico, the Rio Grande—soft underbelly of the United States.

This looks like a worried Soviet Union. It is the same one we have just seen revealed in France's expulsion of 47 Soviet diplomats and other residents in France. It is a USSR conducting unprecedentedly large, risky and politically costly intelligence operations in the West to obtain technology and industrial processes hopelessly beyond its mean to develop at home. The Soviet spies expelled from France were not interested in state secrets nor in infiltrating the government. They were, according to the French Ministry of Interior, conducting a "systematic search throughout the national territory . . . for scientific, technical and technological information, particularly in the military domain."

In the Soviet-American relationship today, there is a mirror-imaging of fear, as in a darkened mirror. Both sides act as if their backs were against the wall. Little that happens between them is allowed to possess independent cause or motive.

People in the government in Washington have expressed much confidence recently that the hardened statements and decisions of the Soviet Union in recent weeks mean nothing serious. These are held to be propaganda that will pass. I am not so sure. The amount of miscalculation, ideological preconception, bad analysis, fear [justified and otherwise], and ill will between the two countries seems to me never to have been higher since the death of Stalin.

For the two sides to see one another truly would not mean that they would make peace with one another. That is the liberal fallacy—that international conflict is merely the result of misunderstanding. The fundamental hostility between the U.S. and the Soviet Union is not based on misunderstanding; it is inevitable, given the rival political and moral commitments of the two. What is not inevitable is that they conduct their relations amidst culpable ignorance, with fear and bad faith their counselors. That seems very close to the case today.

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